

## **ARIUS - The Trinity Controversy in the Church**

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The first three hundred years of Christianity are fraught with factions and feuding over the concept of Trinity. There were divisions between the major Church centers of thought; Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Rome. One such division over the nature of Jesus (as) which led to the Council of Nicaea, and the declaration of the Creed and belief in Trinity resulted from the teachings of Arius, who did not accept that Jesus (as) was divine. This article examines the arguments surrounding the Arian controversy and how it changed the face of Christian belief forever.

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Indeed they are disbelievers who say 'Surely, Allah is none but the Messiah, son of Mary', whereas the Messiah himself said, 'O children of Israel, worship Allah Who is my Lord and your Lord. ' Surely, whoso associates partners with Allah, him has Allah forbidden Heaven, and the Fire will be his resort. And the wrongdoers shall have no helpers. (Ch.5, v.73)

### **Concept of Christ**

At the start of the Fourth Century AD, the concept of God and the nature and role of Jesus (as) were not clearly understood, and hence there were numerous new strands of thought emerging and new heresies and schisms to deal with. Regarding the nature of Jesus (as) there were several philosophies which emerged during the course of time. These ideas developed in different directions in different areas, depending upon the local influences. Roman Christianity was strongly influenced by the paganism in which it grew up and had to survive. Hence a belief in a God-system which would be understandable to the pagans was essential for the survival of the Church. Son of God equated to the Sun god or 'Sol Invictus' which was very popular among the Roman elite including the emperor Constantine. Elsewhere Greek and Egyptian culture had a major influence.

In Palestine, Judaism had a strong effect and many of the early sects thought of Jesus (as) as a human Messiah, a prophet from God. Such groups included the Ebionites and Elchasaïtes.

Elsewhere, there was a view that he was the literal 'Son of God', and hence part of the God-head (Father, Son and Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost). There were others that argued that all three were co-existent and from one being, while the Sabellians preferred to think of Christ as one mode of God, i.e. that the Trinity represented three states of God, but that there was essentially only one God. This preserved their view of Monotheism. In Islam, there are so many attributes of God mentioned in the Qur'an that rather than having a Trinity, Muslims would need a hundred entities if they had followed the same approach.

Yet another theory was that in actual fact, Jesus (as) was created, and hence not eternal, and therefore could not be God, and was in fact inferior. Whatever views are examined, there was no common accepted view, and the Church faced potential conflict due to these misunderstandings.

The verse of the Qur'an quoted earlier (ch. 5, v.73) refers to those Christians who believed that Jesus (as) was the 'Son of God', but was also actually God! In another similar verse in the Qur'an in the same Chapter Al-Ma'idah, God says:

*They are surely disbelievers who say, 'Allah is the third of three,' there is no God but the One God. And if they desist not from what they say, a grievous punishment shall surely befall those of them that disbelieve. (Ch.5, v.74).*

This verse clearly talks about Trinitarians who associated equals with God in their statement 'Allah is the third of three'. Early Christianity has a history of confusion over the nature of Jesus (as), and the nature of God, and in the interplay between the two, whereas the Qur'an clearly states that there is One God, and Jesus (as) was his messenger, the Messiah for the Jewish tribes.

The Docetists believed that Jesus' body was inhabited by Christ, but that Christ did not suffer the crucifixion. They believed that Christ entered Jesus' body when he was baptised, and left just prior to the crucifixion event. Indeed they argued,

If he suffered, he was not God. If he was God, he did not suffer.

Arius came along at a crucial point in the history of Christianity and made a huge impact with his theology. We shall examine his views in more detail, and see how they changed the course of the development of Christianity.

Table 1: Views of Trinity

Name	Date	Location	Details
Ebionites	60-4th C	Palestine	Jesus was the Messiah, foretold in the Old Testament, and referred to himself as Son of Man. They observed every detail of the Mosaic Law as prescribed by Jesus himself.
Elchasaites	110-	Syria/Jordan	Jesus was a prophet, who taught the strict observance of the Mosaic Law.
Docetism	2nd C-3rd C	Africa	Christ existed as a spirit, not as a human. Christ entered Jesus' body at the baptism, and left just before the crucifixion.
Sabellianism	-257	Ptolemais (Libya)	Christ was a different mode of the Father, rather than a different person. Only one Divine Person (i.e. God), the Word and the Holy Spirit were functions of God.
Paul of Samosata	260	Antioch	He stressed Jesus' ordinary manhood of body and soul, and rejected the pre-existence of the Son. Said to be strongly influenced by Jews in Antioch.
Arianism	312	Alexandria	Christ was created, hence not eternal, and therefore inferior to Father. Jesus

			just like other creatures of God (i.e. men) but superior (i.e. a Prophet).
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## **Arius**

Arius, a priest in Egypt, was born in 250 AD to parents thought to be of Libyan origin. He grew up in Alexandria.

He became a priest in the spring of 312 under the episcopacy of Achillas, who was later followed by Alexander with whom Arius was to clash.

He was greatly influenced by Lucian of Antioch, who had laid great stress on the Judaic monotheistic origins of Christianity.

## **Arius' Views on Jesus (as)**

Arius caused a storm as he started to propagate the view that Jesus (as) was distinct from the Father. He believed that Christ was created (begotten) and hence before that point, would not have existed. He therefore concluded that Christ had a finite nature, whereas the Father had an eternal infinite nature.

Socrates (440) records Arius' formula as being:

If the Father begat the son, he that was begotten had a beginning of existence, hence it is clear that there was a time when the son was not. It follows then of necessity that he had his existence from the non-existent.

Arius' view was based on agennesia i.e. that God is unbegotten, hence God is unique and eternal. Consequently, Christ who was begotten (and referred to himself constantly as 'son of man') couldn't be the true God. The terminology that Arius used (e.g. 'there was a time when the son was not') was to get Arius into serious trouble as we shall see later. Arius said of Christ that he was:

... alien and dissimilar in all things from the Father.

and continued:

There was when he (Christ) was not.

He is also thought to have referred to Christ as the:  
Eldest and highest of creatures.

Hence, he is re-affirming his claim that Christ is not eternal.

Arius had picked up on the idea that Christ was not the literal Son of God, but was the Jewish Messiah, an idea that his teacher Lucian would have found favour with. He would have found ample evidence of this from the Gospels themselves:

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God.  
(Matthew 5:9)

Arius wrote:

Indeed we can become sons of God, like Christ.

Here Arius is accepting that Jesus (as) was a son of God in the spiritual sense, and that there was scope for all men to attain a similar status, although Jesus (as) was superior as he was God's chosen Messiah.

It would have been strange for Arius to look at verses from the Bible quoting Jesus (as) such as the time when during the crucifixion, he said:

Eloi, eloi, lema sabachthani? (My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?) (Mark 15:34)

Would such a quote indicate that God was speaking to himself, blaming himself, doubting himself, or would they be the words of a prophet of God uncertain as to his future, and whether he would be able to fulfil his mission to preach to the remaining lost tribes of the Israelites.

As pastor of Banealis, a district of Alexandria, Arius preached his views to a large audience. His audience respected him due to his ascetic lifestyle, manners and learning. He used such arguments from the Gospels to back up his own claims that Christ was distinct and inferior to the Father, and finite. If Christ had been infinite, he would have had no reason to worry about a temporary crucifixion.

**Row with Alexander**

News of his preaching angered Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, who called a series of conciliatory conferences to try to get Arius to change his views (to be the same as Alexander's). Speaking of Arianism, Alexander is recorded by Athanasius as having written:

It had spread through all Egypt, Libya and the Upper Thebais. Then we, being assembled with the bishops of Egypt and Libya, nearly one hundred in number, anathematized both them and their followers. (Athanas., Hist. Tr. (foreign symbol) 3)

But this was to no avail, and hence in 318, Arius and his followers were excommunicated. Arius was expelled along with Bishops Theonas and Secundus, six priests and six deacons.

Before going into exile, he wrote his beliefs in poetic form in the *Thalia* (the Banquet). He went to Palestine and Bithynia where he was supported by many of the local clergy including Eusebius of Caesarea.

### **Constantine Learns of Conflict**

Eventually, news got back to the Emperor Constantine about this conflict between Bishop Alexander and Arius. Constantine was concerned about the de-stabilising effects that such a feud might have. He asked his cleric Bishop Hosius of Cordova to write to both Alexander and Arius in the following terms:

Constantine the Victor, Supreme Augustus, to Alexander and Arius .... how deep a wound has not only my ears but my heart received from the report that divisions exist among yourselves. I find their cause to be of a truly insignificant nature, quite unworthy of such bitter contention.

Yet, it soon became clear that simple politics would not resolve such a situation. Alexander was adamant that Arius was a trouble-maker, and that he could not reconcile with him, as he wrote:

For it befits us as Christians to keep aloof from those who think or speak against Christ. (Athanas. Hist. Eccl. i.6)

On the recommendation of Bishop Hosius, Constantine called a world Church council or synod, and the venue was changed to Nicaea. The

Council of Nicaea would therefore address the issue of the nature of Jesus Christ (as) and would have lasting effects on the Church from then on.

## **Council of Nicaea**

There had been twenty Arian sympathisers among the attendees to the synod, who are thought to have numbered more than three hundred. Indeed, it is suggested that Constantine changed the venue of the Council from Ancyra to Nicaea to make it easier for the Western bishops to attend, and hence turn the balance against the Eastern Church which still sympathised with its Jewish origins.

The Council strongly rejected the statement of Arius that 'There was when he was not', although two Bishops from Libya refused to go along with this.

The Council finally accepted the following Creed which became known as the Nicene Creed:

One Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father as only-begotten, that is from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light.

Arius refused to sign acceptance of the Nicene Creed which stated that Christ was of the same divine nature as God. He would suffer the consequences, as Constantine was keen to end the conflict as soon as possible, and would no longer tolerate any further debate on the issue.

Many commentators have noted Constantine's political ambitions, and the fact that he wanted a united Church in order to maintain a stable power base around the mediterranean. He therefore had to take strong action against Arius, and he needed to be 'seen to be taking such action' in order to gain support from the clergy throughout the known world.

## **Arius in Exile**

Following Nicaea, Arius was banished to Illyricum. Meanwhile, in an effort to stamp out the Arian view through brute force, the Emperor Constantine wrote:

If any treatise composed by Arius is discovered, let it be consigned to the flames ... in order that no memorial of him whatever be left ... [and] if anyone shall be caught concealing a book by Arius, and does not instantly bring it out and burn it, the penalty shall be death.

Such sentiments from the Church leader made it very difficult for Arius to propagate his views. Arius was undeterred. He maintained his views, and said of his maltreatment:

We are persecuted because we say that the son had a beginning, but God is without beginning ... and this we say because he is neither part of God nor derived from any substance.

Many years later, after repeated calls from Arius that he wished to tone down his views, Constantine had accepted that he should be accepted back into the Church, but just before this was ratified, Arius died while out walking in the streets of Constantinople.

### **Argument of the Arians**

The Arians persisted with their views. There was a power struggle in Egypt as Christians tried to come to terms with the consequences of the debate. Arians maintained that their arguments stemmed from the Gospels themselves. For example, they could use the quote from the Gospel of John:

If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I. (John 14:28)

There were repeated examples within the Gospels of Jesus (as) referring to himself as the Son of Man, and talking of the Father not just in his own context, but in the context of all Israelites.

In order to terminate the Arian movement, at the end of the Council of Nicaea, the members of the synod wrote a letter to the Church in Egypt informing them of their decisions. A few extracts from the letter are presented here:



The bishops assembled at Nicaea, who constitute the great and holy synod, greet the church of the Alexandrians, by the grace of God holy and great, and the beloved brethren in Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis.

Since the grace of God and the most pious emperor Constantine have called us together from different provinces and cities to constitute the great and holy synod in Nicaea, it seemed absolutely necessary that the holy synod should send you a letter so that you may know what was proposed and discussed, and what was decided and enacted. First of all the affair of the impiety and lawlessness of Arius and his followers was discussed in the presence of the most pious emperor Constantine. It was unanimously agreed that anathemas should be pronounced against his impious opinion and his blasphemous terms and expressions which he has blasphemously applied to the Son of God, saying "he is from things that are not", and "before he was begotten he was not", and "there once was when he was not", saying too that by his own power the Son of God is capable of evil and goodness, and calling him a creature and a work.

The letter was meant to be a clarification for the Alexandrians that Arius and his followers were outlawed, and also a clear message that the emperor was now personally involved in the affairs of the Church and would frown upon any further schisms, or misunderstandings regarding the Trinity.

### **Trinity wins Favour**

A common argument used against Arius is that his views would have led to polytheism, and that they originated in paganism. Such an argument was first used by Athanasius who said that if Christ and the Father were separate entities as suggested by Arius, then the natural conclusion would be that there was a plurality of gods, and hence the heretic Arius was proposing polytheism.

Such a view is absurd. It assumes that Arius accepted a divine nature for Christ. However, as we have seen earlier, this is not at all what he was suggesting.

Arius had identified a weakness in the argument for an eternal co-existent Christ alongside the Father, and had proved that Christ could not have been eternal, and was therefore not equal to the Father. In fact, he had gone further, and said that Christ was inferior to the Father, but superior to creatures created by God.

An obvious implication of this statement bearing in mind his mentor Lucian's preference for the Jewish heritage, is that Christ was actually a mortal prophet of God.

Following the Council of Nicaea, many Christians who had held 'unorthodox' views were forced to change, or suffer the consequences. There were years of torment for Gnostics in Egypt who went into hiding. Fearing for their lives, they hid their literature such as the Nag Hammadi library of documents which were uncovered in 1947 by chance in Egypt.

A later Council in Ephesus resulted in Mary being referred to as the Mother of God, and this resulted in yet more trouble for Christians who could not accept this concept.

As a result of the Council of Nicaea, the Trinity became officially recognised, and the Creed has stood to this day.

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